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The Story the Reporter Didn't Write

The revolving door through which some reporters leave for big government jobs—and later return to the media—can be a tricky apparatus, and every so often someone gets his foot caught.

That's what happened to Leslie Gelb, who went back to work at The New York Times after serving two years as director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. Gelb's predicament raises interesting questions about the continuing traffic between the world of government secrets and a profession that is supposed to dig them out.

Could a former government official take advantage of his clout when he becomes a reporter again? Sure. Did Gelb? No.

In fact, his State Department career cost him a story. But that didn't keep some people—including, apparently, the State Department's current politico-military director, Lt. Gen. John T. Chain Jr.—from suspecting that Gelb had traded improperly on his former position for a story he wrote Feb. 13 on U.S. nuclear contingency plans.

The Times story was based on a top-secret White House document that had surfaced abroad and caused a brief furor in the foreign press. It revealed that the United States had contingency plans for deploying nuclear weapons in Bermuda, Canada, Iceland and Puerto Rico but did not tell the governments involved.

But the top-secret document was dated 1975, two years before Gelb's tenure in Foggy Bottom. Chain, who had reportedly been getting some

ribbing about the story, ordered his staff not to talk to Gelb. And in a fit of pique, Chain removed Gelb's picture from the wall featuring photographs of past directors and put this notice in its place:

"Removed for Cause. The P.M. Director, 1977-1979, did willingly, willfully and knowingly publish, 1985, classified information the release of which is harmful and damaging to the country."

Chain didn't name Gelb, nor did he say that Gelb had seen the document during his two-year tour at State. But the implication was clear.

The accusation was outrageous, of course, and after a time Chain and Gelb reconciled.

In fact, there had never been any reason for Chain to suspect his predecessor. Ethics aside, why would Gelb have waited more than five years to write a story he had learned in his official capacity?

Gelb obtained the 1975 document from another source and was astonished to realize that apparently no one had seen fit to disclose its diplomatically delicate contents to the State Department bureau most obviously concerned.

Gelb couldn't recall ever having seen the document during his two years at State. Just to make sure, though, he called friends in his old office and was assured that they were unaware of the document and the policy it described.

For the determinedly scrupulous Gelb, the knowledge that key officials in the State Department had been left in the dark was something he could not ethically write about, since it stemmed directly from the two years he had worked for the government. So he didn't include the information in his story.